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# The Power Deep in Org Chart: Leading From the Middle

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## **The Power Deep in Org Chart: Leading From the Middle**

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## New and Noteworthy

### The Power Deep in Org Chart: Leading From the Middle

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Who are the leaders in your library? It's not as simple a question as it seems. Given the primarily hierarchical structure of most libraries, the prevailing leadership style is usually top-down, consisting of a library director or dean supervising an executive management team of assistant directors or deans, who in turn manage directors and department heads, and so on down the line. The people at the top of the organizational chart are known, at least publicly, as the "library leadership."

However, we all know people in our organizations who take on informal leadership roles regardless of their position on the organizational chart. These are the people that others approach for help with problems, who thoughtfully contribute ideas and comments at staff meetings, who make decisions in their areas with confidence, and who stay informed of developments in the larger organization. In short, they influence others. Joseph Janes offers a good description of these type of employees in a brief April 2014 essay:

"...the person who isn't chairing a committee or overseeing an organization or initiative, yet who is exerting substantial influence on its direction or activities...What I mean is someone who is guiding and shaping, moving things forward, articulating a vision and marshaling support for it, creating and innovating, doing something that likely otherwise wouldn't be done. And from the ranks, without the benefit of—or need for—a title or position from which to accomplish that. It's not necessarily subversive or diversionary, but it's tricky since you don't have the benefit of the machinery of office to turn your ideas into reality."<sup>1</sup>

Although the role of middle management in libraries has been well discussed in the literature, this idea of leadership without a formal administrative title, or "leading from the middle" has gained traction of late.<sup>2</sup>

In *"Leading from the Middle," and Other Contrarian Essays on Library Leadership*, John Lubans Jr. espouses a move away from autocracy in library leadership towards a more participatory, democratic style of management.<sup>3</sup> Lubans, a popular columnist for the journal *Library Administration & Management* (the previous title of this current journal) calls on 15 years of professional experience in 36 essays, which are drawn primarily from his "On Managing" column from 2000 to 2009 and include entertaining anecdotes and examples from varying industries in addition to libraries, including travel, retail, sports and music.

Top-down, "command and control" organizations, says Lubans, are inherently reactive in nature. Lubans asks, "Is your library proactive (doing) or reactive (being done to)?...I have worked with a few leaders who were overly cautious and mistrustful of change initiatives...Whatever the reason, they preferred to play it safe, to be reactive rather than to anticipate new directions and services" (6). It is certainly easier for both administrators and staff to maintain the status quo, to perpetuate the "we've always done it this way" mentality. But that way lies stagnation, ineffectiveness, and low morale: "Drifting takes less energy and has less risk than proactively doing. Yes, there's something to be said for the comforts of the reactive life, unless being done to involves a poke with a sharp stick" (6).

Lubans' writings, in addition to being engaging and entertaining, communicate the key theme of empowerment of self and others. The essays have been edited and updated for the current book, and are organized into four sections: Leadership, Leaders, Coaching, and Techniques. Case studies involving Southwest Airlines, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and Zabar's draw attention to aspects of leadership in industries that parallel those in libraries. A key takeaway is that organizations, regardless of industry, need to become more self-managed and proactive to be competitive, take advantage of opportunities, and meet customer demands. Coaching and collaboration can bring organizations closer to those goals.

Lubans targets this book toward three specific audiences: readers of his column, those who don't often read management literature, and library science students. However, it should be useful reading for all library managers and administrators.

Leading from the middle is usually an ad hoc process, with motivated librarians and staffers at various levels in the organization working from a more proactive work philosophy. Formal studies of middle management attitudes are scarce. An exception is Jon E. Cawthorne's 2010 study on perceptions of shared leadership, "Leading from the Middle of the Organization: An Examination of Shared Leadership in Academic Libraries."<sup>4</sup>

Shared leadership theory may be defined as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both...leadership is broadly distributed among a set of individuals instead of centralized in hands of a single individual who acts in the role of a superior."<sup>5</sup> Further, Cawthorne cites Sandra Jackson's four components of shared leadership: *accountability*, or owning the consequences that are inherent in one's role; *equity*, the mutual recognition of the unique contribution of each individual; *partnership*, a mutually respectful and trusting relationship among individuals who share a common goal; and *ownership*, the personal commitment that an individual makes to outcomes of their work and to the mission of the organization (152).

Based on this context and an extensive literature and research review, Cawthorne's study examines the perceptions of shared leadership among 77 middle managers at 22 academic libraries in the Pacific West (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington). In general,

survey respondents believed that they share information with leaders and are accountable, but receive information from their administrators to a lesser extent. They do feel a strong sense of accountability, as well as a certain level of influence over their areas of responsibility. Communication is a major issue. Cawthorne observes, citing Pearce and Conger's *Shared Leadership*, "In reality, middle managers may be more highly informed and in far better position to provide leadership and influence the accomplishment of organizational goals" (155).

Well-known leadership author and speaker John C. Maxwell offers a detailed study of the perceptions, challenges and opportunities of leading from the middle in his exceptionally well-organized and thoughtful book *The 360 Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence from Anywhere in the Organization*.<sup>6</sup> Although not specifically geared to libraries and information organizations, this book lends itself well to settings in which library staff operate. The key to successful leadership, writes Maxwell, is to "lead in every direction," in other words, to work on influencing not only down, to those who report to you, but also across and up: your employees' peers, your own peers, your boss' peers, and your boss. Influence can manifest itself anywhere and with anyone, regardless of the humbleness of their job titles. Maxwell observes, "The reality is that 99 percent of all leadership occurs not from the top but from the middle of an organization" (1).

The first section of the book tackles seven common myths of leading from the middle of the organization, including The Position Myth ("I can't lead if I am not at the top"), The Influence Myth ("If I were on top, then people would follow me"), and The All-or-Nothing Myth ("If I can't get to the top, then I won't try to lead"). Common challenges, listed in section two, are certainly familiar to anyone who has worked in a managerial or non-managerial position for any length of time: being caught in the middle, following an ineffective leader, being hidden in the middle, and so forth.

Successful leaders do not let these myths or challenges get in their way, however; they can develop skills to enable them to exercise influence at every level of the organization. Maxwell offers specific suggestions for leading in each direction. "Leading up" entails skills such as lightening your leader's load and being willing to do what others won't. At the horizontal, or "leading across" level, suggestions include avoiding office politics and letting the best idea win (even if it's not your own). "Leading down," the direction most managers may assume they have mastered, can benefit from placing people in their "strength zones," modeling the behavior you desire, and rewarding for results.

As library managers, how can we best apply principles such as Maxwell's to our own institutions? What are some concrete ways we can motivate and encourage our own and our employees' sense of efficacy and leadership? Pixey Anne Mosley issues a call to action in an excellent 2014 "Engaging Leadership" column in the pages of this journal.<sup>7</sup> Mosley notes that there is often a bias towards defining leadership in terms of rigid official roles or activities within an organization. Even well-meaning initiatives intended to foster leadership skills may further an elitist perception. For example, programs such as ALA Emerging Leaders, the TALL Texans Leadership Institute, and the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute,<sup>8</sup> while useful for the relatively

small number of people who can attend, reinforce “the bias that ‘leadership’ is for those that are targeted by succession planning to move up within the organizational chart or are already in formal leadership roles with significant organizational influence” (1).

As an alternative to the “succession planning” avenue of leadership development, Mosley suggests that librarians think beyond the traditional model to include recruiting for leadership potential (not just experience), expanding our definition of leadership characteristics, and effectively gauging employees’ skill sets to help ensure they are correctly situated within an organization. Remaining entrenched in the old, top-down way of viewing and developing leadership is a waste of people and potential. Mosley states, “an organization’s overall success is going to be dependent on the commitment, engagement, and culture found at levels well removed from the administrative suite and this sort of peer-based leadership development may be what is more critically needed within organizational cultures to build grass roots leaders and move libraries forward” (2).

Mosley’s and other readings on the topic suggest numerous ways to move ourselves and our institutions forward regardless of where we sit on the organizational chart. These can include creating a culture of experimentation with decision-making, encouraging staff not to give up if ideas don’t come to fruition, allowing time for research of industry trends, and, most importantly, modeling the behavior you would like to see in your employees. What are some other “leading from the middle” techniques you use in your organization?

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Janes, Joseph. April 8, 2014. “Leading From All Sides: What Makes an Effective Leader? Sometimes It’s Not What You Think.” *Americanlibrariesmagazine.org*. Available at <http://www.americanlibrariesmagazine.org/article/leading-all-sides>.

<sup>2</sup> To cite just one example, a recent panel discussion at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Las Vegas, NV focused on “Leading from the Side: On, Off, and Within Your Campus.” The panel featured three academic librarians discussing how information professionals at any level can influence decision-making by “communicating effectively to foster innovation; developing a self-awareness of leadership potential while recognizing that potential

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in others; and building coalitions horizontally and vertically within an organization” (<http://www.acrl.ala.org/ULS/?p=945>).

<sup>3</sup> Lubans, John. 2010. *"Leading from the Middle," and Other Contrarian Essays on Library Leadership*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Libraries Unlimited/ABC-CLIO. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10449960>. For more discussion of Lubans' ideas, see his blog at <http://blog.lubans.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Cawthorne, Jon E. 2010. "Leading from the Middle of the Organization: An Examination of Shared Leadership in Academic Libraries." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36(2): 151-157.

<sup>5</sup> Conger, Jay Alden, and Craig L. Pearce. 2003. *Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows and Whys of Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Maxwell, John C. 2005. *The 360 Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence from Anywhere in the Organization*. Nashville: Nelson Business.

<sup>7</sup> Mosley, Pixey Anne. 2014. "Engaging Leadership: Leadership Writ Large, Beyond the Title." *Library Leadership and Management*. 28 (2). Available at <https://journals.tdl.org/llm/index.php/llm/article/view/7061>.

<sup>8</sup> More information about each of these programs may be found at <http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/leadership/emergingleaders>, <http://www.txla.org/Texas-accelerated-library-leaders>, and <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/ppe/programs/higher-education/portfolio/leadership-academic-librarians.html>, respectively.